The Changing Saudi Woman:

Media, Language and Identity

Final Paper

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Abstract

In Saudi Arabia, women’s basic values and beliefs are changing in ways that affect their political, social, sexual, economic, and religious behavior. These changes can be seen in the acceptance of many Saudi females of new roles in everyday life including the work field, government and media. In this proposal, my aim is to try to understand this change through a focus on English as a second language and specifically on the affects of English media on Saudi women. A qualitative study will be employed, using a semi-structured, open ended interview of two Saudi females currently residing in the United States. The focus will be on how the English language plays a role in changing these women’s social capital, empowered them through reform in their education and the work field, and contributed to the overall change in their role in society.
The Changing Saudi Women: Media, Language, Identity and Culture

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is a country that is less than a hundred years old, founded in 1932 by Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud (Yamani, 2000). It has morphed from a vast empty desert inhabited by Bedouins, to a modern united society in less than seventy years, and it is the young generation that has to deal with these changes. “The new generation, which has been exposed to much more than its parents through education, satellite television and travel, is aware of its capabilities, and this inevitably leads to the questioning of some norms and social rules. This is by no means always overtly expressed because the fear of the unknown compels young people to turn back to a sense of security. The result is a duality or conflict in cultural orientation, often represented by relative proficiency in English… English and Arabic are forces with powerful symbolic valence in Saudi Arabia; they stand for modern/traditional; secular/sacred; alien/comfortable” (Yamani, 2000, p. 69).

Being a relatively young country and with its vast Oil wealth which brought about an influx of modern technology, there is a clash of tradition with in and modernization from outside worlds. Neither is said to be good or bad but it is the young generation that faces this issue of negotiating between traditional being and what modernization brings along with it. As Mezirow (1991) theorized “an individual’s belief system may change as a result of exposure to knowledge that challenges previously learned thoughts, or as a result of the individual’s efforts to comprehend another culture that differs from or contradicts his/her own, which may have been previously perceived as perfect” (discussed in Al-Salem, 2005, p. 4).
Statement of Problem

Although, I have found research on Arab women, a gap in literature remains on the Saudi female specifically. It seems that through my search I was not able to find many studies on these females, and when I did they were by a non-Saudi and painted a very negative unrealistic picture. There is a contrast between the abundant studies on Arab women in Palestine, Egypt, even the UAE, and the studies on the Saudi female conducted by Saudis. And as Glesne (2006) states “a research project is an effort to remedy the ignorance that exists about something” (p.29).

However, I must state that there is an interest in the issue of Saudi Arabia as a country and many questions are being asked, especially in the aftermaths of September 11. There have been studies on Saudi Arabia in relation to change, modernization, attitudes and reform in education. Yet, very few focus on the female, which I believe is a vital part of any society.

Purpose and Research Question

Central to this inquiry and the main motivation for my research topic is my personal experience as a Saudi female who has lived significant amounts of time both in the United States and Saudi Arabia and the bilingual identity I have thus created. The purpose of this study was to examine the affects of English as a second language on young Saudi females currently residing in the United States. I wanted to find out about the roles of a Saudi female and how they may be affected by the English language, specifically through the use of the media. And finally, I wanted to learn more about any changes that have taken place in Saudi Arabia and how that too has helped in the Saudi female’s role. I wanted to learn about the exposure to new
information through English, and how it is interpreted through the Saudi female’s historical, social and local lens.

I began this study with a set of research questions as follows

- What (if any) multiple identities were created by the young Saudi females to balance the ridged traditional role with today’s different demands and needs?
- How has the introduction of the media/technology, specifically in English, impacted the young Saudi female’s way of thinking and knowing?
- What changes have these females made in order to accomplish such goals (educational, social, work field)?

However, I found that not only were the questions too vague, I feel there is a bias also in that I really want to prove myself right. I noticed this in the negative images I have drawn, when in reality I know that being Saudi female is not negative, and that tradition is not a bad word. I needed to step back, refocus, and let the data guide me. That is why I decided to employ an emergent focus design. After my first interview, new research questions began to come up, and they were reconfirmed by interviews that followed.

As I looked through my data, some themes have made themselves present and dominant. And although, the questions remain broad, I feel that they are appropriate for this exploratory study. Thus, these are the new emergent research questions:

- What is the role of English as a second language in Saudi Arabia, specifically for the Saudi female?
- What are the roles of the Saudi female in Saudi Arabia? And how are they affected by English media?
What changes have taken place in Saudi Arabia over the last 10 years? And how have they influenced the roles of the Saudi females?

By changing my research question, I feel that my they have become the ‘heart of my design; as Maxwell (2005) states “your research questions… are at the heart of your research design. They are the one component that directly links to all of the other components of the design. More than any other aspect of your design, your research question will have an influence on, and should be responsive to, every other part of your study” (p.65). They have emerged from my data and made it clear to me that the best ‘fit’ design for my purpose is a narrative analysis. Maxwell continues:

Qualitative researchers often don’t develop their eventual research questions until they have done a significant amount of data collection and analysis. This doesn’t mean that qualitative researchers begin a study with no questions… every researcher begins with certain goals and a substantial base of experience and theoretical knowledge…My point is that well-constructed, focused questions are generally the result of an interactive design process, rather than being the starting point for development (p.66).

Researcher Identity

As Maxwell (2005) states “the explicit incorporation of your identity and experience in your research has gained wide theoretical and philosophical support” (p.38), and so I believe I am a major part of my research design. Being a Saudi female, who was born and raised in the United States, but lived a significant amount of time in Saudi Arabia, I felt truly blessed to have been able to assimilate to both cultures and speak both languages fluently. I often wondered how my exposure to both worlds has helped me become who I am today, how I was
able to combine two different and sometimes conflicting worlds within myself, and how I was able to use my new defined self to create a better environment for myself and others.

Being bilingual has helped me better myself by going to private schools, getting a job in what is considered a liberal environment (mixed hospital setting), and finally continuing my education in the United States. I was able to use my knowledge of both the Saudi world and the Western world to create a ‘smoothie’ suitable for any environment I may find myself in. I am who I am because of my duality. With that being said I believe my researcher identity allows me to be reflexive, which was defined by Maxwell as “the fact that the researcher is part of the social world he or she studies” (Maxwell, 2005, p.82).

Methodology

Being a graduate student who is on the verge of a great journey, my dissertation, I see this class as a way to ‘test the waters’. I am still trying to find my footing as a researcher, and am currently at the stage of discovering myself; I am conducting research on myself, if you will. Looking through the many readings and trying to apply theories and perspectives to myself I found that I do not quite fit neatly into any one category, as many researchers do not. I did, however, discover concepts that spoke to me and found that as a researcher I can choose aspects of theories that I believe in.

When I first began this class I had a difficult time finding a ‘fit’, I incorporated many different concepts from various approaches, because I was worried about being right or wrong. However, I have learned that what works best for me is letting the data ‘speak for itself’ (Glesne, 2006) by continuously searching through it. My study has become an emergent one, where I learn more about myself and my study through the data. Thus, I was better able to fit myself into
a qualitative design using a narrative analysis. Below I discuss some of the qualitative research philosophies I discovered.

I believe that the world can be defined in many ways, that no one way of knowing is right and that it is not easy to understand ones way of thinking. The interpretivist offer me a different lens to view my findings, “human beings construct their perception of the world, that no one perception is “right” or more real than another, and that these realities must be seen as wholes rather than divided into discrete variables that are analyzed separately” (Glesne, 2006, p.7). I believe that through my focus on my participants and trying to understand through them I was able to personalize my data, learn about my participants and see the world through their eyes. Their stories have become the foundation of my research. As Schram (2006) states “necessarily, then, you are focused on particular people, in a particular place, at particular times- situating people’s meanings and constructs within and amid specific social, political, cultural, economic, and other contextual factors” (p. 44). I know understand the importance of having the children present during interviews for participant A, or meeting at participant B’s location as she did not have to wear the head scarf and felt more comfortable. It is their word and their stories that I am trying to tell, and not what I think their stories are.

Maxwell (2005) continues this idea and states that as a researcher I should be “interested not only in the physical events and behavior that are taking place, but also in how the participants in your study make sense of these, and how their understanding influences their behavior” (p.22). Glesne extends this, “the goal of theorizing becomes that of providing understanding of direct lived experience instead of abstract generalizations” (2006, p.27). This helped in my choice of using a semi-structured interview, where I left a lot of room for follow ups. It also confirmed my choice of selecting two participants, I wanted to hear my their personal stories
My goal is to also move from that point and use the critical lens as described by Schram (2006),

Critical inquirers add to the interpretivist’s task—attending to and interpreting a perspective—the responsibility of helping others, including those in the immediate setting, attend to and act upon a perspective. This suggests an approach that may be just as participatory but is clearly more confrontational and value-mediated than that of interpretivists. It moves researchers beyond a concern for describing what is and pushes them and others toward the question of what could be (p.45).

In doing so I must begin by looking at myself and my identity as a Saudi female and researcher, at why I believe what I believe and why I choose to inquire about this topic. I must constantly stop and reflect on my choices, and always keep in my mind my goal and purpose of becoming and helping change agents. I am worried, however, about bias; will I be looking for a problem to solve in order to become a change agent? Although there is a great deal of subjectivity involved in my research, being a Saudi female myself and having a baby Saudi female, I have continually stopped myself from asking negative questions and leading my participants. This has become a growing experience for me and I found that memo-ing has helped me step back and question any biases that may arise and learn more about myself.

*Design and Method*  

I must begin this section by mentioning that my initial goal was to conduct a pilot study. Glesne (2006) states that “researchers enter the pilot study with a different frame of mind from the one they have when going into a real study. The idea is not to get data per se, but to learn about your research process, interview questions…and yourself” (p.43). I went into this study
wanting to learn about my process of conducting research. I do agree with Glesne that I did learn a lot about myself as a researcher, but this was accomplished through a focus on my data, creating an emergent focus design.

The emergent goal of this study was looking at the affects of the English language on the Saudi female, specifically the affects of the Western media. I wanted to also explore the concept of change and what that meant to the young Saudi female, and what it might look like from her perspective. I have discovered that what best fits my goal and purpose was continuous analysis of the data, as Maxwell (2005) states “any qualitative study requires decisions about how the analysis will be done, and these decisions should inform, and be informed by, the rest of the design” (p.95).

Through continual data analysis and memo-ing, I found that I focused on the uniqueness of the individuals having each bound in a separate, different colored notebook. And although this was a pilot study, I found that my goal was to get data, the opinion and thoughts of my participants, letting them guide my research design. My purpose was to describe a certain phenomena within a given group; however, due to the limitations of this class, I have moved from an in-depth study to a pilot study using a narrative story based analysis of two participants, who happen to be close friends, focusing on the story of the individual represented in the bonded data.

Participants and Relationships

The participants I chose for this study are friends. Due to the limitations of this class, convenience sampling was used, as Glesne (2006) says “this strategy has low credibility and is inappropriate for anything other than ‘practice’” (p.35) which is where I am now. Although,
sampling was based on convenience great thought went into the selection. Glesne continues “qualitative researchers tend to select each of their cases purposefully” (p.34); he explains that that is done in order to select ‘information-rich cases’ that can lead to important issues to the research. That is what I feel I have done, although I have turned to friends as participants I chose the two who best fit my needs.

I chose two Saudi adult females who have lived significant parts of their lives both in Saudi Arabia and in the United States of America. Both obtained their undergraduate degrees in Saudi Arabia, and both obtained or will obtain their Masters in the U.S. one is a Saudi who speaks both English and Arabic, the other a biracial Saudi American female. I began the interviews by meeting with my participants at their choice of location and time. We would usually sit and chat before I explain my research purpose and goal then I have them read, ask questions, and sign the consent form. I find that at that point the atmosphere turns formal as my new role is introduced.

The choice of participants for this study will have an impact on my findings. First, being friends, the participants are aware of my interests and goals and this can lead to ‘unauthentic’ data, in that they will tell me what they think I want to hear. Glesne (2006) explains that “research participants overidentify with the researchers. In doing so, they may begin to act in ways that they perceive the researchers want them to act or in ways to impress them” (p.117). I realized this when I found that one participant started to tell a story about her experiences as a masters student in both Saudi Arabia and the US then stopped herself to ask if what she was saying was relevant to my study. Another example is when the other participant had more to say when the recording stopped fearing she would mess up my research.
Also I found that interviewing friends was very awkward. I thought that it would be easier since we already had rapport and comfort. However, I found that I had to take on a whole new role of the researcher, which I believe was harder to create with an old friend then with a stranger. Finally, having friends as subjects creates an issue of assumptions. I know them and they know me, so are my questions based on things I already knew? Am I asking the right questions, or is it because I already know about them I am simply getting to my point and not to the whole story? Glesne (2006) discusses the importance of subjectivity in qualitative research, “subjectivity is always a part of research from deciding on the research topic to selecting frames of interpretation” (p. 119). However, he warns that there needs to be awareness of one’s subjectivity, which can “shape, skew, distort, construe, and misconstrue what you make of what you see and hear” (p.123). This is what Maxwell calls ‘bias’, “something whose influences needs to be eliminated from design” (2005, p.37). I have taken into consideration the issues of bias verses subjectivity, and although I know the importance of subjectivity, for I am “the instrument of the research” (Maxwell, 2005, p.38); I have tried to eliminate bias by reviewing my interview questions and trying to make them neutral of persuasion, asking many follow up questions and using friends for this pilot study who can give me feedback.

These are all issues I have considered in my choice of participants for this study. Unfortunately, there is not much change that could have taken place in our relationship over the duration of the study. However, I am have found that dividing the interviews over a period of three or more meetings has eased the awkwardness, and downplayed my role as a researcher instead of a friend who is asking for a favor.
My ideal criteria would be, however, young Saudi females (between the ages of 18-30) who use the media on a regular bases (watch TV, use the internet, listen to the radio…etc at least one hour a day), who are complete Saudis (not biracial like my friend who did not truly live the ‘Saudi’ life style), and who speak English as a second language. The reason for these choices is because I feel that the younger Saudi female is at a place in her life where she is making choices that can affect her future (such as education, work, marriage…etc), in using the media is exposed to different ideas and worlds, and speak English because I believe that every language is embedded with a culture and I am interested in how the English culture reacts with their Saudi culture.

Participant A: Noor (pseudonym) meaning light; is a Saudi American female age 30 who is of mixed race having an American mother and a Saudi father. She is currently living in the United States and has been for the last 6 years. She was born in the US and lived here until the age of eleven. She moved with her family to Saudi Arabia and continued to live there until late 2003 When she moved to the US with her husband. She has a bachelor’s degree from Saudi in English language and a Masters degree in Child Education form The West Coast of the United States. She is a stay at home mother of two young boys both under the age of 2, and a very close friend of mine whom I have known since the tenth grade.

Participant B: Huda (pseudonym) meaning guidance; is a Saudi female age 26 currently living in the US having only arrived late 2008. She was born in the US and lived there to the age of twelve when she moved back with her family to Saudi Arabia. She obtained her bachelor’s degree from Saudi Arabia in Clinical Sciences and is currently working on a Masters degree in Bio-Chemistry and Molecular Biology. She is single and living with her younger
brother who is also here studying. She is a close friend of mine whom I have known for more than ten years.

Data Collection

A semi-structured qualitative interview will be used as a method of data collection. The initial questions of the interview will focus more on background information, in a structured form in order to avoid directing the interviewee’s responses. They will then gradually focus on the more abstract issues of identity, language, media use, and change in roles. The interview will thus begin with opening questions such as biographical information, followed by questions about language attitudes and perception of their native and second language, followed by media impact and use and future plans. Other questions will address friendship, family, roles, education, work and socialization.

Interviews. Based on my proposed purpose and original research questions I decided to conduct in depth, semi structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with two young Saudi females currently residing in the United States over a period of six weeks. I found that the use of semi structured interviews allowed for the flexibility of listing to the participant and going with their flow. My interview questions were conducted after looking through similar studies conducted on women studies. I used lee’s (2006) study on Hmong women and identity, and by looking through the appendix I was able to find the semi-structured interviews used, in addition to reading about how the participants responded. I also looked through Moaddel’s (2006) study on Saudi Arabia, although he used a quantitative survey, I was able to formulate questions and get some ideas from the questions posed. And finally, I went through Al-Salem’s (2005) study
on the impact of the internet on Saudi female. Although his study was conducted via email, it was still helpful to read through his questions and read the participants’ responses.

By looking through these I was able to get a feel of what an interview question can look like, I was also able to read the participants reactions as well as the researchers intent with the question and final outcome. I found it very interesting to read about Al-Salem’s (2005) choice of removing one of the interview questions because it did not elect the information needed. He realized that the wording was confusing and thus decided not to use it in his final paper. To me, having these concert examples helped me think through my process of creating interview questions.

In the past six weeks, I interviewed both participants; participant A was interviewed three times in a cumulative one hour and thirty minutes, and participant B was interviewed twice in a cumulative one hour and fifty five minutes. Both agreed to follow up interviews. Both interviews were at the location of the participants’ choice, included chatting over food, doing the interview, and then chatting some more. I found that both participants did not really want to start, and focused more on talking to me as friends; they were a little anxious about the interview as if they will be tested on something. This was clear to me in the participants’ body language, where they became more formal, sat up straight and answered directly into the microphone. This was also confirmed after the interviews, when they asked many questions about their performance and answers which made me believe they thought they were being evaluated. I tried to be as comforting as possible, made lots of jokes, allowed for life to continue around us (for example if the kids talked to us I answered them), but had to keep in mind the new imposed role I was bringing in. I think also that body language was a culprit here, as I was anxious to test out my new role as a researcher, and tried to do less so in the next meetings.
Memos. The use of researcher memo-ing and reflection throughout the process of data collection and analysis has helped in the development of methods. Through memo writing, which took place immediately after the interview and before analysis, I found that deep reflection takes place. I ask myself why I did what I did and what affect it had. Many times I find that just writing about my experiences helped me clear my thoughts and I can begin analysis without over thinking and over analyzing the spoken words and just letting them speak for themselves.

Analysis and Coding

I had a list of research questions before me, questions that I have worked hard to come up with thinking that they best covered my goals and purpose. However, after the initial interview, I realized that the research questions I had were too vague to answer, and yet too focused in my head. I found that I was trying to get the answer from my participant and did not focus on what they were saying. I believe that is why I had an unsuccessful first interview.

I started to transcribe the first interview to give myself a feel for the data, to have it guide me and help me refine my research questions. I noticed that even without a coding sheet, I had a pink highlighter in hand and post it close by to pin point what jumped out at me. I was surprised to see that from a fifteen minute interview I had most of the words highlighted, and post it on every page. An interview I had at first thought of as a complete failure on my part, had its merits, I just wasn’t looking at them. At was at that point that I realized the need to refine my research questions to better achieve my purpose.

I began this study using an ETIC model, I had my research questions and wanted answers to them. However, since my research questions were too wide, I turned to an EMIC
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model where the research questions emerged from the data itself. Here I found that the switch served me better, as I was struggling to keep my participants on my track and worried when they strayed. However, from the first interview I realized that the ETIC model did not work for me in this setting and so I quickly switched. I find that an EMIC model served me better as I am not quite sure what I was looking for, also due to the limitations of this study and only having two participants, I felt letting the data guide me was a smarter choice.

I began my data collection by doing what Maxwell (2005) calls organizational categories; using the “broad areas or issues that you establish prior to your interviews or observations, or that could usually be anticipated” (p. 97) as a guide. These were created early on in my idea memo, and were used as a means to create the interview questions. They included: Saudi female roles, education, media, work, English, and the broad term ‘change’.

After interviewing the participants I would transcribe, as soon as I can, and highlight what I believed was relevant to my study; this is what Glesne (2006) describes as rudimentary coding schemes, “you should not keep collecting data for devouring later” (p. 150). I also posted questions, thoughts and follow up questions on post it on the transcripts. I usually write memos about my general feelings (Glesne, 2006), and give myself some space from the data to think about the whole process. I then returned to the data with a pencil and started to break up every paragraph and give it a title or a theme, even if it does not fit into any of my categories mentioned above. I believe this is what Maxwell (2005) called substantive categories, “primarily descriptive, in a broad sense” (p. 97); or Glesne’s ‘description’, where I let the data “speak for themselves” (p.164). By doing this I have found some reoccurring themes and thus was able to create a coding sheet which is connected to my emerging research questions. I am pleased to say that by letting the data speak for itself, I now have research questions and a
coding sheet which at first seemed farfetched because my thoughts were too wide and needed to be focused.

Finally, I put all the transcripts in front of me and tried to ‘connect’ themes and ideas. Here I use the broader meaning of connecting as defined by Maxwell (2005), “the identification of connections among different categories and themes can also be seen as a connecting step in analysis, but it is a broader one that works with the results of a prior categorizing analysis” (p. 98). I then moved to the stage of ‘analysis’, where I was “identifying essential features and the ways in which the features interact” (Glesne, 2006, p. 164). With that step, I began to make some connection and came up with a few broad themes. This has left me feeling very excited as I saw that my data along with my research interests have lead me somewhere.

**Quality and Validity**

I struggled with the issue of validity for this short and limited pilot study. As a learner I turned to books and resources such as the internet to find the answers, and I found that there were many recommendations made. I felt lost and worried about the validity of my research, how do I know if what I am doing is right or wrong? Thankfully a concerned student, like myself, raised this issue in class. I learned it is not an issue of what is right or wrong, but what works for me and how well I support it and critique it. Also, I found what Maxwell said to be an eye opener, “The validity of your results is not guaranteed by following some prescribed procedure” (2005, p.105). I must take steps to aid validity, but thinking that there is a checklist, or one right way, is not the way.

I tried to use what Maxwell calls ‘respondent validations’, “systematically soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying” (2005, p.111). I
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did this during interviews by asking clarifying questions and giving the participant the opportunity to speak and express themselves freely. This was done in a number of steps. First, I tried to schedule our meetings at a time when neither one of us had other engagements so as not to have to end at a certain time. Also, I tried to create a comfortable environment by allowing the participants to pick the setting, letting the children play around us, and providing food and refreshments. I also let the participant speak for as long as they wanted and let them carry the conversation in any direction, although the latter took a lot of restraint from my side. In addition to asking questions during the interviews, I asked follow up questions that came up while I was transcribing during the next interview. I made sure not to meet with the participants unless I have gone through their data at least once to make sure that all was clear.

The use of memos, the constant analysis of my data and the use of my own researcher identity, helped me clarify some of my biases. Glesne explains that this “reflection upon your own subjectivity and how you will use and monitor it in your research” (2006, p.37) is ‘verification procedure’ one can use to assess validity issues. Having to write memos, whether about myself or my process, made me sit and think about my own perceptions and biases. It became clear to me that I was very biased in my first draft of this paper after having reread it and seeing the comments made by my professor. I was making the issue of Saudi female identity and role very negative, and I realized that I did this to prove a point, not because it was necessarily true. During my analysis of the data, I tried to look for these biases and avoid them. This became a growing experience for me. Learning from myself and not turning to others was a very hard yet rewarding experience.

Finally, as part of the class assignments, peer review was used. It is summarized by Glesne as “external reflection and input on your work” (2006, p.37). I found that handing your
work to your peer was a great way to get feedback and critique without worrying about a grade. I also realized, however, that there was some awkwardness in not wanting to offend a friend. Many smiley faces, checks and encouraging words were used, and any critique was in the clarifying question format.

Findings and Discussion

Through my analysis, I have made some common connections within the small amount of data I have. Many themes emerged but I focused on four because I thought they were the most relevant to my interest and purpose. They are as follows:

- The importance of the English language in Saudi Arabia.
- The English language as access in Saudi Arabia.
- Culturally prescribed roles for females in Saudi Arabia.
- Change in Saudi Arabia, which may have lead to change in Saudi women’s role.

Other emerging themes such as why more Saudi women choose to be teacher, restrictions viewed as choices by the Saudi females and comparing US and Saudi education are not used here simply due to the limitations of the this class. I do think, however, that they are vital themes that need to be looked into in more details and can be used for future research. Below is a short summary of the four main themes:

*The importance of English.* One of the major themes I have found between both participants was the Importance of the English language as a language of status. Using such descriptive as prestige, educated, well traveled, open minded and high class, both participants touched upon the theme connected with speaking English as a second language in Saudi Arabia. It was very interesting and very fulfilling to hear both speak the word “prestige”. When I heard both use that word, a light bulb went off in my head and my first research question showed
itself. There are many sub-themes that fall within the theme of ‘English as prestige’ including class, education and as young teenagers ‘cool’. As participant A mentions “I think it gives some people confidence knowing English in Saudi Arabia, I think some people they feel more prestigious more, they feel more educated I think, I think English is very highly valued in Saudi Arabia”. She continued to talk about the images associated with speaking English:

The more English you know, the better you spoke English, you are just looked at as more highly educated. If you were young possibly you were looked at ‘oh well wow she comes from an educated family, her family is more open minded and educated’. Also, I mean sometimes it also gives off the image that you know could be false or true, but also speaking English sometimes gives off the image ‘oh they must be from a wealthy family as well because they must have traveled abroad and they must, you know, they must be exposed to these things or maybe they have English teachers they can afford to have to bring English teachers to their house and that why they speak English so well’ so whether true or not it gives off this image, it gives off an image of prestige (Noor).

Participant B also touched upon this topic of image by stating:

I think it reflects your background and where you come from, that you grew up you know, somewhere other than Saudi Arabia, that you’ve seen the world, you’ve traveled. It really says a lot about umm your background and what you’ve done and what you’ve seen, and it even says, to be honest, it even says something about even your class…so those that speak English obviously went to private school, they obviously traveled. It says a lot about class (Huda).

*English as access.* Both participants spoke about the access that the English language allows them. Form travel to job opportunities, both were very thankful for the possibilities made
available to them through knowledge of the English language. Participant A realized the access gained by the English language and how it empowered her while on vacation with her Arabic speaking relatives. They heavily relied on her in communicating and planning, and she felt in charge, “my ability to learn English empowered me; it empowered me to communicate, to find my way. They always looked to me to help them out… for a Saudi woman travelling, if she can at least learn English because I saw from my cousins’ perspective that they had a very hard time communicating abroad” (Noor).

Participant B, on the other hand, spoke of the access English allowed her in the educational and work field,

I can tell you that in my internship, it had a big role; I mean in the medical field it’s all English. So the fact that you’re fluent in English speaker comes number one. Anyways, when you apply for a job in Saudi Arabia in a bank, or you apply in a hospital, or you apply where English is the language, is the medium or whatever, let me tell you they prefer for example someone who is fluent in English to someone who studied economics for example in a bank… they said that umm ‘we can teach you the banking part at the bank, but we can’t teach you English’ this is what matters most, that’s it (Huda).

Culturally prescribed roles. It was interesting to hear both participants speak of the culturally prescribed role on the Saudi women. Participant A mentioned that there are certain ‘rules’ when it comes to what a female should do with males, “but it wasn’t even discussed because no one was doing it” (Noor). Thus she touched upon the unwritten ‘rules’ that a Saudi female follows. Participant B also touched upon this theme, “there are rules and there are borders that are really as a female oh my goodness you can’t, you can’t pass them. Really you can’t even think about it” (Huda). However, she did not let that stop her from following her
dreams, “The clinical field is not so segregated and there is a stigma associated with a female who works with other males in our society, but I felt like umm you know I just felt like with my grades and my goals I just felt like I can’t let society make such a major decision that I will regret forever” (Huda).

*Change in Saudi Arabia.* Both participants agreed that change has taken place in Saudi Arabia. It was interesting to hear the different perspectives and different reasoning for this. Participant A believes that having the new king and the change in government had a role to play, while participant B believes it is because of the scholarships that are given to anyone willing to travel and get educated. What is really intriguing is that both touch upon the topic of media. Participant A says:

I mean the country itself had modernized SO MUCH that the culture had to change, I mean, I think that the culture was forced to change a long with it. I mean if you think about our grandparents, my grandparents, when my grandparents were growing up, I mean there was NO radio, no TV, no umm some places no electricity, some places you know no communication with anything outside of their village… it was very little interaction with the outside world, very little and everything was very traditional and the way they have lived for hundreds and hundreds of years you know nothing had changed and then suddenly in the last sixty years everything changed (Noor).

Participant B believes it affected females more, she states “The past 3 to 4 years umm a lot more girls had access to umm American movies and umm just the internet and the cable television it really boomed in the past 3 to 4 years in Saudi Arabia and I think that the Saudi girls were kind of in a bubble before this” (Huda). She continues in a following interview, “I
just wanted to say that I feel like people always had, people were ready for change and the media was a catalyst” (Huda).

As I have mentioned above many more themes have emerge as I obtain more data. The question that I cannot help but think about is whether I am leading my participants to give me these themes? I believe that due to the limitations of this class, and having only two participants, I am trying hard as a researcher to find connections. I often wonder if I ask the same questions over and over again to get the answer I want. I noticed that in the first interviews I was using that technique, but with memo-ing and early transcriptions I caught myself and tried to stop.

Conclusion

Although I am currently writing my conclusion section for this paper, I realize that my topic is a work in progress. I have started the PhD program with an interest in Saudi females and the English language, and I have seen this topic grow and change with me as I grew and changed. It is, however, only now that I realized how much this topic is a part of me because of the time, effort, and sleepless nights I have spent thinking about my purpose and research questions. I know my purpose, but how do I get it into words? How do I make it clear, focused and researchable? And how do I address it with the proper questions? I then realized that the best option for me was to let the questions emerge from my interests and data, and that these questions will continue to change until I feel satisfied that they address my goals. And although I am turning in a final paper for this class, this is a work in progress and is not over.

My participants are not the perfect fit for this purpose, due to the limitations and restrictions of this class, but they are a great beginning and I have discovered a lot about myself and my process through them. I have found that they are helping in guide me and in focusing my view and that is why I decided to give them the pseudonyms Noor and Huda, for they are
my light and guidance. In addition, they have given me wonderful data to analysis and better my
focus. Being friends they have also provided feedback and helped me try on my researcher role.

These participants have also helped guide me in my interview questions. Through them I learned how to ask proper interview questions, how to respond and how to clarify. One interesting aspect that came out of this was the realization that my question about female roles was not at all clear and needed to be dropped (What is your role today? What do you think the role of a Woman is? Is there one?). This question is too wide and all over the place. To me it made sense, but through the process of interview and transcription, I realized that it is not clear at all and needs to be more focused. I will continue to work on this question as I think the role a Saudi woman plays in society is very vital, just as it is in other societies. I believe this process will be a long one, as I need to work out my own definitions of role before I can move on.

Even after dropping the question on the female’s role, I found that my data offered me many themes. And although I choose four themes to focus on, there are many more that have not been ignored. I plan on using them as a guide for my future research and interviews. I now know that qualitative research never ends, that is because it emerges from passion which I believe to be a continuous source of energy and drive.
References


